

## Learning from “Digital Natives:” Forming a New Generation of Religious Leaders

Richard Nysse

The theme of this issue of *Reflective Practice* raises serious questions. Are not supervision and spiritual formation for ministry inherently antithetical to all the chatter about virtual worlds? I have been asked a similar question by colleagues as I have taught online classes for the last fifteen years: because ministry is embodied, doesn't education for ministry have to occur in an embodied classroom? My standard answer has been to agree that ministry is embodied, but then to assert that learning for ministry does not need to occur in front of my body. Why not give priority to learning in the context of the bodies present in parish contexts? The primary social location of learners matters and perhaps teachers must “travel” to the social location of learners. Learning is disruptive, but the learner does not necessarily need to be displaced (i.e., inhabit a school) for the disruption to occur. I make these statements to provide a context for the comments below.

I write as a practitioner of online learning, specifically in the area of Old Testament. Although supervision and spiritual formation are not my

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vocational center, I have been deeply engaged in preparing future pastoral leaders. As a consequence of my online teaching and my commitment to preparing pastoral ministers, I am pestered by one question that is the impetus for these reflections: "What needs to be done to form the new generation of pastors and supervisors for whom the digital technology is natural?"

#### WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE?

First, those who would classify themselves as outside of this new generation need to listen, observe, and withhold judgment. Deep curiosity and inquiry would be in order as is the case in any movement across cultural boundaries. (The "new" generation is different enough that speaking of "movement across cultural boundaries" is not hyperbole.) Questions to be asked include: How are members of the "new" generation communicating with one another? What are their rules? What constitutes a violation of their *ethos*? What draws them closer to each other? When they communicate with acquaintances, or with friends, or with those with whom they are intimate, what are their communication patterns? The listening and observational skills of a counselor and an ethnographer are in order.

One way to start listening and observing is to contrast "digital immigrants" and "digital natives," a distinction introduced a decade ago by Marc Prensky.<sup>1</sup> The contrast is apt as a heuristic device even though it is not a formal sociological classification. The "native" versus "immigrant" distinction is not chronological; rather, it is behavioral. It is a distinction between those for whom digital communication is a first language ("natives"), not a second language ("immigrants"). Of course, some "immigrants" can eventually become quite adept at a second language. Framing the distinction in terms of language and culture is more helpful than a generational framing.

Secondly, there is a need to recognize that power relationships will be disrupted. The root image in Prensky's distinction needs to be nuanced when considering the distribution of power. The "natives" have the needed information; they are adept at what needs to be learned. The "immigrants" have more credentialing power; they determine who is certified for ordination or successfully completes Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE). They have the "power of the grade" (or other symbols of appellation). But when it comes to learning the second language of the digital culture, the "immigrants" become the mentee or apprentice, while the "natives" assume the role of supervisors. As with any good supervisor-mentee relationship, the

communication is not one-way; there is a mix of didactic one-way communication and give-and-take dialogic conversation. For example, when the abbreviations used in texting need to be learned, a didactic response is appropriate; the transmissional mode has a place in learning. Those who are teaching, in this case, are the ones with less power. Those who control the credentialing systems are the ones in need of tutoring, supervision, and formation. Once the needed information is transmitted, however, a more dialogical relationship can once again commence.

Thirdly, there will be a period in which the “immigrant” learner feels like a beginner. The mantle of “expert” will have to be placed on the hook. That is not surprising. All learning has a component of unlearning, of beginning again. If that seems too strong, try an analogy to service learning—or experiential learning in a CPE or field education setting. There is no substitute for practice. Even “experts” need to engage in actual practice. Jumping into digital learning is necessary; it cannot be learned apart from engaging in practice.

#### VALUING DISRUPTIVE DIGITAL LEARNING

If one grants the need for “immigrants” to jump into digital learning, one must concede the possibility that digital learning has been sufficiently successful to merit seeking what it might have to offer. That is not universally granted. Member schools of the Association of Theological Schools differ significantly over the appropriateness and success of distance learning for the formation of theological leaders. Opposition to digital learning, especially in the form of online courses for students at a distance from our institutions, is accused of dumbing down, or commodifying, education, betraying the essential embodiment of the faith, and a host of other deficiencies. Although each of these charges has been countered successfully, in my opinion, I here wish to assert only that the charges should not be treated as conclusive. We ought not commence our learning with a verdict already in hand.

I would suggest that we back up a bit (or slow down, as the case may be) and examine our responses to the terms and the phenomenon we encounter as disrupting our settled practices. For example, when a phrase like “digital learning” is used, what does it evoke for us? Much confusion arises because the phrase does not yet connote a standard referent in our learning cultures. What mental constructs are operative when we hear the phrase? The image of a solitary figure sitting before a flight simulator is one operative men-

tal construct. Rodin's "The Thinker" sitting before a computer screen was a common image used a decade ago to satirize online learning. Grandchildren punching away at their handheld Nintendo DSi devices, while in the presence of their grandparents, is another example. There may be grudging admiration for their dexterity, but most grandparents initially regard it as an expensive entertainment gadget that prevents conversation.

If one watches a bit longer, however, it is clear that children are asking each other questions when they are stuck or wirelessly transferring games to each other or actually playing a game with each other. They are engaged in considerable exploration, valued interchange is occurring, and social negotiation is taking place. The learning is informal, but it is also significant. Historically, informal learning has suffered varied degrees of suspicion or disregard. It is okay to pick up "skills" or "crafts" informally, but it is often not valued as "knowledge" apart from folklore studies. While that may sound like a populist response to the presumptions of cultural and educational elites, there are new patterns of learning emerging that cannot be ignored. Even if our first reaction is to fear the loss of standards, quality, authenticity, and a host of other virtues that are in theory under threat from digital and social media, we are not exempt from the need to face these questions.

Is the flight simulator the apt analogy for learning in online courses—or, for that matter, online mentoring and supervision? Granted digital technology speeds up transactional procedures like transmitting and distributing forms filled with data. When we move beyond the transactional, the response will have to be nuanced. The flight simulator image may be apt for online courses that are basically electronic correspondence courses. If learning is primarily understood as receiving and retaining the conclusions of the teacher or supervisor (the subject matter experts), then an online course working within that understanding of teaching and learning will seem to be little more than a variation on a flight simulator. (I am assuming, of course, that flight simulators have a proper and important place.) The didactic voice of the simulator may seem a bit one dimensional compared to the live voice and visual presence of a teacher in the classroom, but, in the end, the student is evaluated on the basis of replicating what the expert voice has communicated. Readers of a journal like *Reflective Practice* might immediately object to such a teaching and learning paradigm. Obviously, the student is not a vessel to be filled through an online course or a classroom lecture!

Objections and cautions are not, on the other hand, automatically dismissible as caricatures or the fearful voices of Luddites. Reverse caricatures

are not helpful either. I linger on this issue because it often derails explorations of what is now possible in the era of digital technology and social media. Both exploration of emerging affordances and necessary assessment of implementations of those affordances are sidetracked by either defensiveness or boosterish posturing.

#### BEYOND TECHNOLOGY: LEARNING NEW BEHAVIOR

A more fruitful approach is to step back from evaluative deliberations (and pre-judgments) to see what is emerging. The talents that make for good “formation and supervision in ministry” can be put to good use in navigating the world of digital technology and social media. It is a new world, even though the degree of disruptiveness (for better or worse) of the “new” may be disputed. It is worth returning to Prensky’s distinction between “digital natives” and “digital immigrants.” It reminds us that what is natural behavior for digital natives is, at best, learned behavior for digital immigrants—immigrants are aware of having learned a second language. His distinction is nomenclature for a shift in behavior, not merely shifts in technology.

Once we focus on behavior, rather than technology, we become students of human behavior and we are back in the realm in which readers of this journal are particularly adept. Before we pass judgment on digital technology and social media, we will need to engage in a long period of listening and observing. Perhaps we could even imagine being a good tourist before we lock ourselves into either the native or immigrant image. We might ask whether or not we come to the new “country” or “culture” with any prior “knowledge.” Have we read a tourist guide? Have we picked up a batch of hearsay impressions prior to our journey? What values from our own prior experience and culture are we apt to use wittingly, or unwittingly, as a lens for our new experience? What are we most apt to “see?” We don’t go to Tuscany *de novo*; we arrive with expectations. What are the myths/assumptions we bring to our journey into human behavior in the era of digital technology and social media?

As a tourist in a new “country,” we may need a tour guide or two. One such guide is danah boyd.<sup>2</sup> She has written extensively on teens and social media, using her blog as a primary publication outlet. That latter piece of data about her may already raise suspicions for you regarding her credentials, but welcome to the new world of social credentialing. She does have the requisite doctoral dissertation to establish initial credibility in academic circles, but her credibility was established through her use of social media

well before she completed her thesis. She is an ethnographic tour guide in social media country. In September 2010, she announced her intentions to write a book focused on "myths that we have about teens and social media."<sup>2</sup> Her preliminary list included eight myths:

- Myth #1: The digital is separate from the "real" world.
- Myth #2: Social media makes kids deceptive.
- Myth #3: Social media is addictive.
- Myth #4: Kids don't care about privacy.
- Myth #5: The Internet is a dangerous, dangerous place.
- Myth #6: There's nothing educational about social media.
- Myth #7: Kids are digital natives.
- Myth #8: The Internet is the great equalizer.

In listing these myths as the initial organization of her projected book, she invited her readers to add their "favorite news articles that reinforce these widespread beliefs." Dozens have responded and their responses are not a mere echo-chamber, but a fine illustration of the extent to which collaboration is very easily executed. There is no need for a conference, although that is not precluded. There is no need for a long delay between request and response—most comments posted in response were done within two days. But aside from the altered relationship to space and time, the breadth of respondents is remarkable. The reader does not know their credentials; we cannot pre-judge the value of their comments based on their degrees or job titles. Does this mean Myth #8 is not a myth? No, few readers would judge all the comments to be of equal value for the project that danah boyd is undertaking, but the criteria for participation and subsequent evaluation are now unhitched from predetermination by hierarchal guardians. If you are an established guardian, you are likely to feel a considerable loss. If you are one of the voices that has often been shut out on the basis of gender, race, or social class, you might find the playing field is a bit closer to level.

I said a "bit" closer to level. Why the hesitant endorsement? Put Myth #1 next to Myth #8 and you can see the complexity of the world danah boyd is guiding us through. The Internet has not become the "great equalizer" proclaimed by its most ardent boosters. It reflects the "real" world, which is filled with inequalities. Contrary to the impression created by many critics, social media have not separated teens from each other according to danah boyd's research. Their "friends" on Facebook are of two types at a minimum. There are friends who are listed and who's posting show up on their

page, but, in contrast, there are friends with whom they actually communicate. The latter are overwhelming their friends in their embodied environments—and, their “real” friends, both in person and online, reflect the social stratifications of society. The in-groups and out-groups overlap considerably in the two arenas of interaction. Injustice in one is reflected in the other; racial bias in one is reflected in the other. In short, their online world reflects their real world; it is, in fact, a single world for them. To return to Prensky’s terms, the teens who actively use social media are digital natives with but one world; for digital immigrants however, online and offline remain different worlds.

If we address the myths danah boyd has listed, we will find it hard to give a straightforward true or false response. Each response will need to consider context. Part of the contextual consideration will be the other myths listed. Their interplay multiplies the contextual factors to be considered. If we moved beyond the teen population, responses would again be altered. For example, the role of Facebook and Twitter in the politics of the Egypt and Tunisia in early 2011 worked in a manner far different from the teenage “friending” on Facebook. Obviously, the unfolding events are attributable to more than Twitter and Facebook, but the latter were equalizing factors. Shutting down these means of communication is not as simple as placing guards around the printing press. There is no need to ship in paper for printing or set up transport systems to distribute printed copies. The analog world has bottlenecks that can be readily strangled. In the context of political mobilization, the responses to Myth #1 and Myth #8 will be different from those in the context of teen cultures.

At this point, we can add a second tour guide for our journey to the new “country” of digital technology. Clay Shirky’s recent books<sup>3</sup> probe the social changes that have emerged as a result of employing social media technology. Shirky’s publications emphasize gains more than dangers. That is not problematic if we are proceeding as “tourists.” Shirky, using many specific instances, sketches the shift from broadcast (newspapers and TV, for example) to networked communication (such as blogs and wikis, for example). At first, the marvel of digital technology was speed and breadth of access to information, but Shirky points to access to conversation as the more significant shift. The cost of coordinating communication is much lower; groups can be formed with a fraction of their prior costs. There is a reduced need for finding an agreed upon time and place to meet for conversation and interaction. Can more people attend on Tuesday night or on Thursday night?

Is the community center or the church basement the better place to meet? These organizing “costs” evaporate. Shirky asserts that this does not introduce a new competitor in the old ecosystem; rather it creates a new ecosystem. Wikipedia does not compete in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*’s ecosystem—it is a new ecosystem. The social media tools that have received widespread usage are tools that have helped people do what they actually wanted to do. The impulses for change in Tunisia and Egypt existed prior to Twitter and Facebook—the latter did not create the passion and combining the two led to the streets, that is, to the embodied world. The contrast between the virtual and real is, in these instances, a false dichotomy.

Is this all for the good? Of course not—pornography is still present in the new ecosystem and vulnerabilities can be exploited. Those who hate others can use the social media to coordinate ethnic violence as readily as those who use it to expose and oppose violence. It was used, for example, in both ways following the December 2007 election in Kenya. Humans contest in this ecosystem, for good and for ill. If we travel as tourists into the digital terrain with guides such as Shirky, we need to suspend our judgments long enough to discover what is emerging, but we do not need to totally jettison our evaluative capacities or responsibilities. We do retain some reservoir of independent judgment even in the presence of tour guides. The shift from scribes to the printing press altered the world in ways that we would not want reverse, but dark forces were not thereby removed from human experience. Similarly, we are in a period of transition and there will emerge both things we would not want to reverse and consequences we will have to mitigate or oppose. Refusing to make the journey will not stop the negative consequences. We need, as we have in our familiar ecosystem, to accompany human beings, to listen, to learn, to converse, to question, and to affirm. The capacities we have will morph as we journey into the emerging ecosystem, but there will be lines of continuity. Once the hyperbolic rhetoric of boosters and naysayers dies down, we will still be dealing with human behavior—changed behavior, but still human.

So, readers of *Reflective Practice*, enjoy the journey.

#### NOTES

1. Marc Prensky, “Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants,” <http://www.marcprensky.com/writing/prensky%20-%20digital%20natives,%20digital%20immigrants%20-%20part1.pdf> (Last accessed March 10, 2011). For a listing of a publications disputing Prensky’s contrast, see Doug Holton, “The Digital Natives/Digital Immigrants Distinction is Dead, or At Least Dying,” <http://edtechdev.wordpress.com/2010/03/19/the-digital-natives-digital-immigrants-distinction-is-dead-or-at-least-dying/> (Last accessed



March 10, 2011). While one can readily concede points made by critics, most of what is reacted to are overextensions of Prensky's point. He did not attempt to make claims that needed social scientific criteria for validation. The basic heuristic value of distinction in 2001 cannot be denied and it is still serviceable for commencing conversation in many general audiences.

2. danah boyd, "Favorite Myth-making News Articles?": <http://www.zephoria.org/thoughts/archives/2010/09/11/favorite-myth-making-news-articles.html>. For a selection of her blogs, see <http://www.zephoria.org/thoughts/bestof.html>. Her dissertation, *Taken Out of Context: American Teen Sociality in Networked Publics*, is available at <http://www.danah.org/papers/TakenOutOfContext.pdf>. (All links accessed March 10, 2011).
3. Clay Shirky, *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing Without Organizations* (New York: Penguin Press, 2008) and *Cognitive Surplus: Creativity and Generosity in a Connected Age* (New York: Penguin Press, 2010).
4. For a nuanced review of the role of digital media, see Joshua Goldstein and Juliana Rotich, "Digitally Networked Technology in Kenya's 2007–2008 Post-Election Crisis" [http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/sites/cyber.law.harvard.edu/files/Goldstein&Rotich\\_Digitally\\_Networked\\_Technology\\_Kenyas\\_Crisis.pdf](http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/sites/cyber.law.harvard.edu/files/Goldstein&Rotich_Digitally_Networked_Technology_Kenyas_Crisis.pdf) (Last accessed April 18, 2011). In contrast, Clay Shirky narrates primarily the positive effect in *Cognitive Surplus* (15–16).

Social networking is a vast and unfamiliar world, explored by millions who are making their way—and making mistakes. When the pastor joins, she is entering a world where family, friends past and present, and parishioners past and present are already interacting and eavesdropping electronically. The first question to be asked once the pastor is on Facebook is whether and to what extent one will be pastor on Facebook... Given the great potential for both good and evil online, pastors have a unique opportunity to be engaged in the electronic world in which their parishioners are active. As with nearly everything, the best use of online social networking is a critical engagement. After poring through social-networking research, I became far more discerning, considered online habits more consciously, and made some changes. I expect to continue to adapt. Social networking involves courageous steps into a world millions of humans already inhabit. If God calls us into the realities of life wherever people experience it, then we can go boldly and enjoy the ride, for this critical engagement comes with a lot of fun.

**Amy C. Thoren**

"The Pastor on Facebook: Boldly Going Where Everyone Else Goes" in *Word and World* 30, no. 3. (Summer, 2010).